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Freud's antiquities

Richard D. Lane* and Karen L. Weihs

Upon entry to the Freud Museum in London, one is struck by the enormous collection of antiquities (figurines, busts, statues) on display from ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and other cultures. Freud was fascinated with ancient civilisations and collected these objects throughout his career. He believed that bringing pathogenic unconscious mental contents into the light of conscious awareness was a process akin to recovering 'buried treasures' (Freud, 1937). In fact, his office was arranged so that from his chair, positioned at the head of the couch, he could view and contemplate these antiquities during psychoanalytic sessions (see Figure 1; Engelman, 1998).

The parallel between unearthed buried treasures and making the unconscious conscious during psychoanalysis, while an important advance and extremely useful at the time, creates a misimpression about the nature of the unconscious. Modern psychological research has demonstrated that fantasies and their motivational properties do not reside in the unconscious fully formed waiting to be unveiled when the forces of repression are overcome (Schimek, 1975). While the hypothesised unconscious mental contents may be fully formed in the therapist's mind, they most commonly exist in the patient in an undifferentiated form consisting of sensori-motor schemes that are pre-ideational and pre-verbal (Schimek, 1975). The Boston Change Process Study Group, for example, has concluded that conflict and defense are higher level abstractions that are derived from, and do not underlie, the implicit level of lived interaction (Boston Change Process Study Group, 2007).

Viewing unconscious mental contents as 'buried treasures' implies that the therapist can know with certainty something about the patient that the patient does not know. Becoming consciously aware of unconscious mental contents is instead a creative, interactive process (Stern, 1983), the outcome of which cannot be known in advance by the analyst. Failure to appreciate this reality can potentially lead to distorted constructions or threats to the

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Figure 1. Freud's office in Vienna. From his chair (1), Freud looked out at a table (2) and display case (3) filled with antiques.

therapeutic alliance. An advantage of the modern understanding of unconscious mental representation, and a more interpersonal approach to therapeutic work, is that it helps the therapist to appreciate that therapist and patient are always engaged in a mutually creative process (Lane & Garfield, 2005).

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